

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name El Cortez Hotel and Casino
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 600 Fremont Street ☐ not for publication
city or town Las Vegas ☐ vicinity
state Nevada code NV county Clark code 003 zip code 89101

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official _____ Date _____

Title _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register ___ determined eligible for the National Register
___ determined not eligible for the National Register ___ removed from the National Register
___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

El Cortez Hotel and Casino
Name of Property

Clark, Nevada
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	private
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box.)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	1	buildings
		sites
	1	structures
		objects
1	2	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/hotel
RECREATION AND CULTURE
COMMERCE/TRADE
OTHER: Casino

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/hotel
RECREATION AND CULTURE
COMMERCE/TRADE
OTHER: Casino

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY
REVIVALS/Spanish Colonial Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: CONCRETE
walls: BRICK, STUCCO, CONCRETE
roof: TERRA COTTA, ASBESTOS
WOOD, CAST IRON, ALUMINUM,
other: GLASS, PLASTIC, STEEL

El Cortez Hotel and Casino
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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The El Cortez Hotel and Casino was originally constructed in 1941. The property consists of the original hotel/casino situated on the northeast corner of Sixth and Fremont streets, a multi-story parking structure on the corner of Seventh and Fremont streets, a 15-story hotel tower near Sixth Street and Ogden Avenue, and a connecting wing between the original hotel/casino and the hotel tower. Architecturally, the original two- and three-story hotel/casino building is primarily Spanish Colonial Revival in style. The subject property is located in downtown Las Vegas along the city's primary entertainment thoroughfare, Fremont Street (in contrast with the Las Vegas Strip, which is outside city limits). The original building is of concrete and weeping mortar brick construction with medium-pitched gables and a recessed three-story hotel wing. Red clay tiles cover roof surfaces. Fenestration consists of a mix of narrow recessed multi-pane steel casement windows and fixed glazing. A 1952 exterior remodel resulted in the 'modernizing' of the ground floor façade and the installation of new rooftop neon signage, marquee, and vertical neon blade sign. It is this exterior that is visible on the original building today. The parking structure was erected in the 1970s, and the hotel tower in 1984. The portion connecting the tower to the original hotel/casino was added in 1985. The exterior of the original hotel/casino exhibits a high level of physical and historical integrity from its period of significance, 1941 – 1952.

Narrative Description

Please see attached.

El Cortez Hotel and Casino

Name of Property

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Period of Significance

1941-1952

Significant Dates

1941, 1945, 1946, 1952

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Original Builder: Marion Hicks

1945 remodel, architect: Wayne McAllister

1952 remodel, architects: Zick and Sharp. Builder:

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance for the El Cortez Hotel and Casino is 1941-1952, corresponding with the period when the property was most instrumental in the economic development of Fremont Street. It is also the period when the exterior of the original El Cortez Hotel attained its current appearance.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

El Cortez Hotel and Casino

Name of Property

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The El Cortez Hotel and Casino is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A at the local level for the history and development of casino tourism and entertainment in Las Vegas, Nevada. Additionally, a case could be made for eligibility under Criterion C. That argument, however, is not provided here as that would require a statewide or even nationwide context for the history of casino development, which has yet to be written. With such a context in hand, it would be possible to argue that the El Cortez is eligible for listing under Criterion C as an excellent example of the earliest period of Nevada casino architecture. The El Cortez Hotel and Casino is associated with the economic development of Las Vegas in general and Fremont Street in particular from the early 1940s through the early 1950s. With its 1941 opening, the El Cortez represented downtown's prosperous future at a time when Fremont Street was the heart of the city. It retained this status until the early 1950s when the success of the new resorts along the Las Vegas Strip outshined the properties in downtown Las Vegas, including the El Cortez. As a result, the El Cortez Hotel and Casino represents a tangible, visible, and significant link to the broad patterns of Fremont Street's economic development from 1941 until approximately 1952. Therefore, the property meets National Register Criterion A for important historic associations.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Please see attached.

El Cortez Hotel and Casino

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Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

Please see attached.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 2.77 acres

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 11 667414 4004309
Zone Easting Northing

2 _____

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing

4 _____

El Cortez Hotel and Casino
Name of Property

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Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The parcel associated with the address 600 Fremont Street, Las Vegas, Nevada. Specifically, Block 3 of Buck's Subdivision and Block 7 of Hawkins Addition, City of Las Vegas, Clark County, Nevada.

APN: 139-34-612-004
2.77 acres

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

This is the official boundary currently associated with the property known as the El Cortez Hotel & Casino.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Peter Moruzzi, architectural historian
organization _____ date October 2012
street & number 2935 Angus Street telephone 213-706-0151
city or town Los Angeles state CA zip code 90039
e-mail petermoruzzi@gmail.com

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: El Cortez Hotel and Casino

City or Vicinity: Las Vegas

County: Clark

State: Nevada

Photographer: Peter Moruzzi

El Cortez Hotel and Casino

Name of Property

Clark, Nevada

County and State

Date Photographed: July 21, 2012

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

Please see attached.

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Ike Gaming, Inc. dba El Cortez Hotel & Casino

street & number 600 Fremont Street

telephone 702-385-5200

city or town Las Vegas

state Nevada zip code 89101

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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El Cortez Hotel and Casino

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DESCRIPTION

Current Appearance

The El Cortez Hotel and Casino is located in downtown Las Vegas on a nearly three acre parcel bounded by East Ogden and Fremont streets to the north and south, respectively and by North Sixth and Seventh streets to the west and east, respectively. The parcel contains the original hotel and casino building, which was constructed in 1941 and modernized in 1952, together with a parking garage and a hotel tower, which were constructed in the intervening decades. Although the garage and tower are connected to the historic building they are considered non-contributing additions and do not diminish the integrity of the historic building.

The architectural style of the El Cortez Hotel and Casino is primarily Spanish Colonial Revival. The style is characterized by asymmetrical massing, low pitched roofs covered with clay tiles, shallow eaves, arched openings, covered porches or arcades, and recessed rectangular windows with lintels. Decorative elements can include wrought iron balconets, glazed tiles, clay pot chimney caps, and round towers with conical caps. Whereas stucco typically sheathes exterior surfaces, exposed brick with “weeping” mortar clads the original El Cortez building.

The south and primary elevation of the building, faces Fremont Street where the city sidewalk provides a modest setback for the building from the street. An arcade with a shed roof projects from the west elevation over the sidewalk along Sixth Street. The north and east elevations are partially obscured by the adjoining hotel tower and parking garage, respectively.

The original portion of the El Cortez is irregular in form, resembling a U-shaped plan that was filled in and added on to in later years. Two symmetrical two-story wings with medium-pitched gabled roofs face Fremont Street. Perpendicular and intersecting the gabled wings, sits a three-story hotel wing. The façade of the first floor hotel wing is flush with the façade of the gabled wings and is capped by a shed roof. The second and third floors of the hotel wing, however, are correspondingly recessed and are capped by a low-pitched hipped roof. A one-story circular tower completes the roofline of the central hotel wing and provides a focal point contrasting with the otherwise square and angular lines of the building.

Fenestration consists of narrow recessed multi-pane steel casement windows and fixed glazing all with header brick sills. On the lower level, metal-framed doors welcome in guests. On the upper levels, decorative shutters surround the windows. At the midpoint of the east and west gabled wing's second story a single door leads to a small balcony with decorative iron railings and a flared metal hood. Centered above the balcony a small decorative circular vent appears below the gable peak. Similar circular windows and vents appear on various elevations.

Construction materials include a concrete foundation with brick walls and a tiled roof. The brick façade features a decorative touch of weeping mortar, and a belt course of concrete delineates each floor. The brick façade is in contrast to the smooth, stuccoed surface of the lower front façade, which coupled with the addition of play bill signs, was added in 1952. Regularly laid, straight barre tiles cover the roof along with a handful of decorative Spanish style chimney tops.

A prominent rooftop sign supported by an elaborate steel support structure sits atop the three-story hotel wing. ‘El Cortez Hotel’ followed below in smaller letters by ‘Coffee Shop & Bar, Free Parking’ is visible throughout downtown. A full-width marquee extends along the Fremont and Sixth street facades. The marquee projects over

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the sidewalk and provides space not only to highlight current, changing attractions but also permanently advertises El Cortez's 'gambling,' 'floor shows,' 'cocktails,' and 'fine foods.' An expansive arrow highlights 'Gambling' and intersects the marquee to lead guests to the front façade.

Original Appearance and Subsequent Alterations

Understanding the current condition of the hotel requires examination of its original condition and subsequent modifications. In 1952, modifications to the façade altered the original 1941 appearance. These modifications are present today and contribute to the significance of the building.

Originally when built in 1941, an entrance on the east gabled wing facing onto Fremont Street led to a café illuminated by narrow rectangular steel casement windows and a parabolic arched window. Colorful Spanish tiles surrounded the windows on the first floor. Similarly, another parabolic arch marked the entrance to the west gabled wing leading to the El Cortez casino. A row of four narrow rectangular windows complementing windows on the east wing provided light to the casino's interior. Guiding customers to the hostelry was a collection of neon signs indicating "Café," "Restaurant," "Casino," attached to the south façade and "El Cortez Hotel" atop the south entrance. Occupying the space atop the roof's southwest corner was a large metal-framed neon sign proclaiming "El Cortez Hotel, Free Parking." Crowning the circular tower in brilliant neon was the letter "C" for Cortez.

In 1945, following a transfer of ownership, the dining room was expanded to the north, thus filling in the original U shaped plan. The following year, in 1946, another change of ownership resulted in a "\$250,000 expansion program" for the El Cortez.¹ Added was a refurbished casino, dining room and bar, barbershop, Western Airlines downtown office, swimming pool, and a large nightclub. Los Angeles architect Wayne McAllister was responsible for this remodel.² With the exception of the nightclub, which was an extension of the secondary north elevation, and the installation of the outdoor swimming pool,³ all alterations completed in 1945 and 1946 were limited to the interior of the building. The alterations are not visible from the street and do not diminish the integrity of the primary façade.

In 1952, both the interior and the exterior of the El Cortez were remodeled. Alterations to the exterior were based on the designs of Las Vegas architectural firm of Zick and Sharp, with C.D. 'Roy' Long serving as general contractor. Alterations to the interior by decorator Tom Douglas (who is discussed in detail in Section 8) included updating the décor from a Western theme to a "contemporary Modern" one.⁴ Additionally, the floor plan changed, as well. The casino was relocated to the center of the building, a small dining room was built adjacent to the coffee shop, and a room was built to house a large new supper club.⁵ To accommodate the supper club, a portion of the north elevation was removed for the expansion. Sanborn maps confirm that the hotel's one story dining room/supper club occupied the space between the two-story gabled wings and behind the three-story center wing.

Zick and Sharp, USC School of Architecture graduates, had established their firm in 1949. They would become famous for their designs for the Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino (1955),⁶ the ultra-modern Mint

¹ "El Cortez Announces \$250,000 Program," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 16, 1946. Pages 1 and 2.

² Nichols, Chris. *The Leisure Architecture of Wayne McAllister*. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2007.

³ The exterior swimming pool was located east of the original hotel/casino where the multistory parking structure would be erected in the 1970s.

⁴ "Talented Interior Decorator Sharpens El Cortez Hotel," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1952. Page 14.

⁵ City of Las Vegas building permit #12751. March 25, 1952. Addition in rear.

⁶ Listed in the National Register in 1992.

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Hotel and Casino (1957), and the Union Plaza (1971). However, the architectural team had not yet established their reputation by 1952. As relates to their efforts that affected the El Cortez' façade, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* stated, "In the case of the El Cortez, the general architectural structure and design, while considered good in its time, had become outmoded and outdated. A conference of architects and owners resulted in a choice of motif, which was to be contemporary modern."⁷ As noted in the description above, the 1952 exterior alterations are those that remain visible today.

Alterations to the exterior of the building included the addition of new signage that replaced the original neon signage on the roof and exterior elevations. A prominent rooftop sign supported by an elaborate steel support structure designed by the Young Electric Sign Company was installed. Soon after, additional signage and a full-width marquee appeared on the building. An article in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* described the alterations:

A brilliantly lighted marquee with traveling lights will extend along the entire front of the building and down the Sixth Street side. The marquee projects seven and one-half feet out and contains three attraction panels with interchangeable letters. Running along the front of the marquee will be one foot eight inch letters reading 'floor show,' 'cocktails,' and 'fine foods,' while four foot, six inch letters in the center will proclaim 'El Cortez Hotel.' The ceiling of the marquee will be illuminated with neon tubing and fifty-eight 150-watt floodlights, so that guests strolling beneath will enjoy light as brilliant as the noonday sun. Color scheme utilizes grey, white, yellow and peach gold.⁸⁹

In keeping with the new modern theme, the original Spanish elements of the building's ground floor façade were removed. Similar to the arcade that remains along Sixth Street was an arcade along Fremont Street that was removed. Along Fremont Street, replacing the arched openings, center arcade, narrow casement windows, and weeping mortar was new smooth brick veneer across the street-facing elevations with numerous glazed wood-framed entrances and large framed plate glass windows. Showbill display cases were placed near windows and entrances.

The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of growth and development for the El Cortez property. In 1970 a multi-story parking structure located east of the El Cortez hotel was erected. An expansion of the parking structure was completed in 1976.¹⁰ In 1982, El Cortez Townhouse, whose construction predated the El Cortez Hotel and was located near the northwest corner of the parcel, was relocated in anticipation of construction of the new hotel tower. This 41-unit building once occupied approximately one-third of the block along Sixth Street between Ogden Avenue and Fremont Street. The building had been renamed the El Cortez Townhouse when it was purchased in 1941 by owners who would erect the adjacent, and much larger, El Cortez Hotel later that year. A historic photograph shows that the El Cortez Townhouse was **Spanish Colonial Revival** in style. With its main entrance facing an alley between the two hotels, the El Cortez Townhouse would continue to be used as a hotel annex until 1982 when it was sold and relocated to a parcel several blocks away to make room for the El Cortez's new 15-story hotel tower that was completed in 1984.¹¹ Connecting the tower to the original hotel/casino is a one-

⁷ "El Cortez Hotel is 100 Per Cent 'Home-Owned'," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1952. Page 14.

⁸ "Bright Lights to Move to Lower End of Fremont," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1952. Page 15.

⁹ The color scheme as noted in this article has since been altered to the current color scheme which consist of neutral palette of tan, white and brown

¹⁰ City of Las Vegas building permit #45961. February 3, 1969. Parking garage – 9 levels. \$609,800.

¹¹ City of Las Vegas building permit #3287. September 2, 1982. Hotel tower: 185,524 square feet; 12,368 square feet per floor. \$9,100,000.

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and two-story portion with elevations facing Sixth Street that was completed in 1985.¹²

Despite changes to the property and subsequently to the setting, changes to the building's façade have been relatively limited since 1952. Specifically, along the Fremont Street elevation, wood-framed entrances have been replaced with metal-framed entrances within the same openings, and the plate glass windows have been filled with show bill display cases. Changes to the west elevation include the expansion of the first floor (north of the arcade), removal of decorative grates below second story windows and the addition of shutters to these windows, removal of a decorative chimney top, extension of the roofline, and the enclosure of the second floor balcony including the removal of brackets and installation of windows and flower boxes. Nonetheless, since 1952, the rooftop sign and exterior marquee, "Gambling" sign, ground floor renovations, and second and third story façades of the original El Cortez Hotel and Casino essentially retain their historic appearance.

Integrity

The El Cortez Hotel and Casino retains excellent integrity. Today, the building, when viewed from Sixth and Fremont streets continues to reflect the design of the 1952 remodel when the ground floor façade was 'modernized' and rooftop signage and marquee were installed. Additionally, the building's massing, materials and decorative roof elements reflect the design of the original 1941 construction date. While the parking garage and hotel tower are visible and alter the setting, they do not diminish the integrity of El Cortez. As viewed from the southwest corner of Sixth and Fremont streets facing northeast towards the property, El Cortez continues to convey the magic and possibility of 1952 when downtown Las Vegas emerged as an entertainment destination. Today, the El Cortez Hotel and Casino remains one the oldest establishments on Fremont Street and is the only establishment to continue operation under its original name.

¹² City of Las Vegas building permit #3572. October 6, 1983. Connecting building. \$2,530,000.

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NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Criterion A

Fremont Street was the center of Las Vegas' tourism industry and the heart of the city's entertainment district from its incorporation in 1905 until the early 1950s, when it was supplanted by the booming resorts along the Las Vegas Strip. When the El Cortez opened in 1941, it became the largest and most fashionable hotel/casino in the City, representing downtown's prosperous future and becoming a key element in the entertainment and commercial development of Fremont Street.

The city block upon which the El Cortez Hotel would be built consists of two subdivisions, Buck's and Hawkin's Addition. The former was subdivided in 1905, the latter in 1921. Clark's Las Vegas Townsite, the historic center of the city's original downtown, began west of Fifth Street (which would be renamed Las Vegas Boulevard). On May 16, 1940 the majority of lots facing Fremont Street between Sixth and Seventh streets owned by the Colorado River Exploration Company, Ltd. were sold to Marion B. Hicks and his business partner John C. Grayson.¹³ Marion B. Hicks was a Los Angeles based developer who, with business partner John C. Grayson, was responsible for conceiving the El Cortez Hotel in the early 1940s. Hicks and Grayson hired local contractor C.W. Jorgensen to erect the El Cortez Hotel and Casino, which opened on November 6, 1941. The building's original architect is unknown.

The history of the El Cortez would be documented over the decades by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* with an initial article announcing its grand opening:

[The El Cortez Hotel]...represents an investment of approximately \$325,000... 71 bedrooms and baths...8 luxury suites...large dining room to seat 125...casino, an elaborate cocktail room where there will be dancing, a bar, a beauty parlor, a large lobby, outside porch and patio.... A western motif has been carried out in modified manner in the selection of furnishings and decorations for the entire building so that the visitor will be subtly conscious of the 'last frontier' atmosphere of the community, yet provided with luxurious and comfortable surroundings.¹⁴

America entered the Second World War one month after the El Cortez Hotel was completed, the beginning of a five year period that did not seem to negatively affect the business success of the hotel/casino. In September 1943, Hick's partner John Grayson sold his shares to Tom Hull, former owner of the Hotel El Rancho on Highway 91 (that would become known as the Las Vegas Strip or simply the Strip).¹⁵ Hicks and Hull immediately announced an "extensive redecoration and addition of new furniture as soon as materials are available."¹⁶ It is not clear that the 1943 redecoration occurred because Tom Hull was associated with the El Cortez for only three months when Hicks purchased Hull's interest in the property.¹⁷

Moe Sedway and the Investment Syndicate

¹³ Deed dated May 16, 1940 and recorded May 23, 1940, in book 27 of Deeds at Page 46, Clark County, Nevada. Although not indicted in the deed, John C. Grayson was a co-owner of the property with Hicks.

¹⁴ "El Cortez Hotel Opens to Public This Evening," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 7, 1941. Page 3.

¹⁵ "El Cortez Hotel Interest bought by Tom Hull Today," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 8, 1943.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Hotel Interest is Bought by Hicks," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, September 8, 1943. Page 2.

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On March 28, 1945 a story appeared in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that would henceforth link the property to some of America's most notorious underworld figures. Under the headline, "El Cortez Sold":

Transfer of ownership of El Cortez Hotel from Marion Hicks and J.C. Grayson of this city to Edward Berman of Minneapolis and Moe Sedway of Las Vegas was in the process of completion, the potential purchasers said this afternoon. The price was reported to be \$800,000. ... The purchase price, it is understood, includes the lot on the northeast corner of Sixth and Fremont streets, the hotel and 'Town House' annex comprising 103 rooms, casino, coffee shop, cocktail lounge etc.¹⁸

A deed dated April 6, 1945 records the transaction as follows:

Marion B. Hicks and Lillie E. Hicks, J.C. Grayson and Dorothea J. Grayson in consideration of \$10 do hereby sell to Moe Sedway, a single man, and Edward Berman, a single man, ... [all lots related to El Cortez] together with the improvements thereon and all of the hotel and other furniture and fixtures, hotel equipment and supplies therein or thereabouts.¹⁹ [The sale having been signed by all participants on March 29, 1945]

As for the recorded purchase price of \$10, this was in stark contrast to the \$800,000 value of the transaction as reported by the press one week earlier. The story was reconfirmed in an April 2, 1945 article that stated "... Sedway and his associates purchased the property for approximately \$800,000 last week."²⁰ Moe Sedway, who hailed from New York, had been a long time associate of Meyer Lansky and Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. Sedway arrived in Las Vegas in 1941 and quickly became involved in the growing casino business in the city. Edward Berman was a Minnesota crime figure who had recently relocated to the desert city.

A December 13, 1945 *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article was especially telling because, for the first time as documented in that newspaper, underworld figure Gus Greenbaum was identified as a member of the El Cortez ownership syndicate along with "other members [who] were not revealed by Sedway."

Reorganization of the ownership of the El Cortez Hotel, dining room, casino and bar, and expansion of the dining room was revealed today with the letting of a contract for \$250,000 worth of improvements. The hotel will be owned by a new syndicate headed by Moe Sedway and Gus Greenbaum, and Edward Berman, one of the former owners is out of the picture, Sedway declared last night. *Other members in the syndicate were not revealed by Sedway* [my emphasis].²¹

"Other members in the syndicate" would most likely have referred to Meyer Lansky and Benjamin Siegel, who were later identified as co-investors in the El Cortez at that time. Indeed, it is surprising that Gus Greenbaum's name appeared at all given that he would not be mentioned again in deeds or *Las Vegas Review-Journal* newspaper articles relating to the El Cortez. As for the hotel's improvements, under the auspices of Los Angeles architect Wayne McAllister, the article continued, "... the dining room will be expanded to cover the vacant lot

¹⁸ "El Cortez Sold," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 28, 1945. Page 1.

¹⁹ Deed

²⁰ "El Cortez Deal Completed Today," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 2, 1945.

²¹ "El Cortez in Owner Change," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 13, 1945.

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next door to the hotel which is used for a used car lot. With a capacity of 300 to 350 persons, the new dining room will be one of the largest and most lavish in Las Vegas..."²² It should be noted that there is no evidence from Sanborn maps or other sources that a dining room was actually expanded onto an adjacent lot.

After only seven months as an investor in the El Cortez, Edward Berman sold his interest in the property as announced in a public notice dated December 22, 1945, "The said Edward Berman is retiring from said business...the said Moe Sedway is continuing the said business under the name El Cortez Hotel Company."²³

Events moved quickly during this time at the El Cortez. On March 5, 1946 a Deed of Trust (a mortgage) was recorded with Moe Sedway, Raymond R. Salmon and wife, and J.K. Houssels and wife, listed as Grantors, to Pioneer Title Insurance & Trust Company with Allied Building Credits, Inc., named beneficiary. Moe Sedway signed the mortgage deed.²⁴ This document is the first formal acknowledgment that Houssels and Salmon were involved in the El Cortez. J.K. Houssels Sr., in particular, would be key to the property's evolution until its sale to a consortium headed by Jackie Gaughan in 1962. The mortgage was apparently taken to finance an expansion program at the hotel consisting of "...a new barber shop, Western Airlines downtown office, swimming pool, a night club designed to surpass any in the state in size and elegance, and an additional four-story wing,²⁵ resulting in the largest hostelry in Las Vegas."²⁶ An article dated March 30, 1946 confirmed that, "The El Cortez hotel will be manned by virtually a new staff after April 1. ... J. Kell Houssels and Ray Salmon will assume operation of the hotel on that date."²⁷ Interestingly, it would not be until three months later on July 30th of that year that the sale of the El Cortez would be formally recorded by the County:

Moe Sedway, a single man, in consideration of \$629,314.44 do hereby sell to Raymond R. Salmon and J. Kell Houssels [all lots related to the El Cortez] together with the buildings and improvements thereon of the value of \$451,114.44, including the heating and cooling plant of the value of \$12,500.²⁸

Over the decades various rumors and legends regarding the ownership and management of the El Cortez have surrounded the property. Current research relying on official deeds and newspaper articles of the period confirm that a syndicate of Moe Sedway, Edward Berman, Gus Greenbaum and other associates owned the El Cortez from April 6, 1945 until July 30, 1946, a period of 17 months. It is unknown precisely how much was paid for the property in 1945, although \$800,000 was reported by the press (but \$10 on the deed), and what the property sold for one-year-and-five-months later (\$629,314.44 on the deed). However, it appears highly unlikely that the investment syndicate headed by Moe Sedway would have sold the El Cortez Hotel for a loss. Although Raymond Salmon and J. Kell Houssels Sr. took over management of the El Cortez in late March of 1946 when they co-signed a mortgage with Moe Sedway, they did not officially own the hostelry until four months later.

Meanwhile, in November 1945 just seven months after Sedway and his associates had purchased the El Cortez,

²² Ibid.

²³ "Public Notices: Notice of Dissolution of Partnership," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 22, 1945. Page 13.

²⁴ Deed of Trust and Chattel Mortgage dated March 5, 1946 as Recorder's Instrument No. 218065, in Book 34 of Trust Deeds at pages 62 to 71, Clark County, Nevada, records.

²⁵ This four-story addition was never built.

²⁶ "El Cortez Announces \$250,000 Program," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 16, 1946. Pages 1 and 2.

²⁷ "New Owners Revise Staff at El Cortez," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 30, 1946. Page 5.

²⁸ Deed dated July 30, 1946, Clark County, Nevada, records.

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Los Angeles nightclub impresario Billy Wilkerson had begun construction of the Flamingo Hotel and Casino on the south end of Highway 91 which is known today as Las Vegas Boulevard, or the Las Vegas "Strip".

Apparently running out of money soon after the project began, Wilkerson accepted a large investment from a group headed by Harry Rothberg of New York that included Moe Sedway, Gus Greenbaum, Meyer Lansky and Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. These investors helped finance the construction and opening of the Flamingo Hotel, a property whose management would pass to Sedway, Greenbaum, and Dave Berman (Edward Berman's cousin) following Benjamin Siegel's murder in mid-1947.

The life of Benjamin Siegel has been mythologized in newspapers, books, television and movies since Siegel was shot dead in the living room of his girlfriend's Beverly Hills house in 1947. Siegel, a feared member of the Genovese crime family of New York, was noted for his quick and violent temper. He arrived in Las Vegas in the early 1940s to, along with Moe Sedway, invest in the Northern Club, located west of El Cortez on Fremont Street. In 1946 Siegel expanded the syndicate's Trans-America race wire, which, according to lore, is how he came to be associated with the El Cortez Hotel as one of its hidden investors. It has been suggested that the short duration of the syndicate's ownership of the El Cortez – only 17 months – was in part due to their increasing financial obligations associated with the construction of the Flamingo Hotel that Siegel was managing. As a result, the Flamingo Hotel is the property to which Benjamin Siegel became more closely associated than for his behind-the-scenes involvement with the El Cortez.

J. Kell Houssels Sr. and the El Cortez

El Cortez co-owner J. Kell Houssels, Sr. was one of the early gaming pioneers of downtown Las Vegas having secured a gambling license in 1931 for his Las Vegas Club on Fremont Street. He also was an investor in downtown's Boulder Club and, later, would be one of the key investors in the Showboat and Tropicana hotel/casinos on the Strip. In addition, Houssels "...invested in many kinds of business, including the bus company, 711 Cab Company, the Round Up Drive-in restaurant, [and] the Overland Hotel."²⁹

Following his investment in the El Cortez in 1946, for the next 15 years J. Kell Houssels, Sr. would collaborate with many other Las Vegans in the management of the property. For instance, on May 14, 1947 the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported this item: "An announcement was made today of the association of Fred Merrill, Chick Flournoy and Benny Binion with J. Kell Houssels in the management of the El Cortez hotel and casino... Ray Salmon, who has been associated with Houssels in the hotel for the past several months, has withdrawn from the establishment."³⁰

By the early 1950s, especially with the success of the swank Flamingo Hotel, the Spanish flavor of the El Cortez was becoming stale (although the hotel was only 10 years old at the time). Hence, in 1952, a major remodel of the El Cortez was announced that would completely alter the interior, ground floor façade, marquee, and neon signage into "Las Vegas Contemporary" as directed by the talented interior designer Tom Douglas. Indeed, Douglas had been responsible for the Flamingo Hotel's smart modern interior, as well as the Shadow Mountain Club in Palm Springs, original Ciro's nightclub, and Saks Fifth Avenue of Beverly Hills.³¹ He had also recently refurbished the Hotel El Rancho Vegas when owner Beldon Katleman "...told Tom Douglas he wanted to get rid of the 'corn' but keep the Western character."³²

²⁹ "Houssels Story is True Vegas Success Tale," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1952. Page 44.

³⁰ "Announce Change in Management of El Cortez," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 14, 1947. Page 4.

³¹ "Talented Interior Decorator Sharpens El Cortez Hotel," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1952. Page 14.

³² Feature Ad regarding Tom Douglas, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 18, 1952. Page 14.

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A feature advertisement about Tom Douglas – most likely placed by Douglas himself – appeared in a multi-page June 18, 1952 *Review-Journal* issue primarily devoted to the unveiling of the updated El Cortez. The laudatory ad gushed, “Tom Douglas introduces a brand new theme...a sort of ‘Last-word-Spanish’ which will soon be known throughout the world as ‘Las Vegas Contemporary’!!”³³ Historic photographs depict interior spaces that were indeed ‘modern’ for their day with clean lines, hidden lighting, contemporary furnishings and gathering spaces enhanced by whimsical murals and other decorations. All of these interior elements have since been removed.

The J. Kell Houssels Sr. era lasted until 1962 when he sold his interest in the El Cortez Hotel to a group of investors headed by Las Vegas Club owner Jackie Gaughan. The group was comprised of Gaughan, Mel Exber, Larry Hezzlewood, and Houssels’ son, J. Kell Houssels, Jr.

Jackie Gaughan and the El Cortez

John D. “Jackie” Gaughan has been connected to Las Vegas since 1945, when he made a small investment in downtown’s Boulder Club whose prime investor was J. Kell Houssels, Sr. Having been co-owner of a race and sports book in Nebraska prior to his service in World War II, Jackie Gaughan was already familiar with the gambling business.

In 1951 Gaughan became an investor in the Flamingo Hotel where he also worked a shift as a casino floor man.³⁴ Also during the 1950s, Gaughan operated several Las Vegas sports books with partner Mel Exber. The two had also taken over ownership of the Las Vegas Club during this time. In late 1962, Jackie Gaughan, Mel Exber, Larry Hezzlewood, and J. Kell Houssels, Jr. purchased the El Cortez Hotel from J. Kell Houssels, Sr.

...and thus [after 1962, Gaughan] began his run as the dominant casino man in downtown Las Vegas. Over the next four decades Gaughan would individually own or in partnership, casinos that included Club Bingo, the [Union] Plaza, the Gold Spike, the Western and the Nevada Hotel. He acquired acreage in the downtown area, motels and minor interests in other casinos like the Pioneer Club and the Showboat Hotel/Casino. In addition, in the mid 1970s he held over 100,000 shares of Golden Nugget stock when a young Steve Wynn was running the operation, [and] held a seat on the Board of Directors of the Nugget and the Showboat.³⁵

Said the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* of the 1962 transaction,

[The] Nevada Gaming Commission will consider approval next month of the gaming license application of four new owners of the El Cortez Hotel, who made the purchase yesterday for a reported \$4.3 million. The Commission will meet Dec. 6 and again on Dec. 18 to act on the sale of the familiar downtown landmark to a group headed by Las Vegas Club owner Jackie Gaughan. Ownership was transferred to Gaughan, Mel Exber, Larry Hezzlewood, and J. Kell Houssels Jr., who purchased 100 per cent control of the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ His stake in the Flamingo grew over the years until 1967, when he sold his percentage of the operation to Kirk Kerkorian.

³⁵ Skelton, Mike. “70 Years of Vegas History,” *Casino Collectible News*, Volume 24 Number 4. Pages 20 and 21.

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hotel property and casino pending license approval by the gaming commission. New owner Mel Exber told the R-J that his group plans to construct a multi-story 700 room hotel in the future, with a convention hall, three swimming pools, and shops on the hotel's full city block of property. 'It will be a city in itself,' Exber said. Present owners of the El Cortez include J. Kell Houssels Sr., J. Kell Houssels Jr., Nelson Conway, Fred Morledge, Joseph Kelley, James Shugart, George Zettler, R. Julian Moore, and Judd Parker. They have run the hotel for the past four and a half years. New ownership becomes effective January 1."³⁶

Of all of his properties and investments, the El Cortez Hotel was the center of Jackie Gaughan's operations from 1962 until he sold his interest in the property to his business partners 46 years later in 2008. Gaughan continues to live in the hotel's penthouse and is a regular at the casino's poker tables to this day (2012) and remains the public face of the El Cortez.

Historic Context

The Advent of Gambling in Las Vegas³⁷

In 1928 the U.S. Congress passed the Boulder Canyon Progress Act allowing for the construction of Boulder Dam, now called Hoover Dam. Construction of the dam, which began in 1931, had a significant impact on the economic and physical development of Las Vegas. Because of the national depression, thousands of laborers arrived in Las Vegas to work on the dam. These men and their families, in need of goods, services, and housing, spent their hard-earned wages in Las Vegas. The dam was also a boon to the city's tourist trade. The same year that construction on the dam started, the Nevada legislature repealed gambling prohibition and liberalized its divorce laws by shortening residency requirements from three months to only six weeks, further spurring the local economy. Between 1920 and 1930, the population of Las Vegas doubled, increasing from 2,304 to 5,165. In 1940, just prior to the construction of the El Cortez Hotel, the population has nearly doubled again, rising to 8,422 (Mooney 2002).

World War II was the next big event to stimulate growth and development in Las Vegas. The government, fearing an attack on the West Coast, feverishly built military bases and war industry plants throughout the western United States. In Las Vegas, the Army Air Gunnery Range began construction in 1941, followed in 1942 by Basic Magnesium, Inc. in what was to become Henderson, Nevada. The construction and operation of these military and industrial facilities, with the influx of servicemen, military contractors and workers, had a significant effect on the development of Las Vegas.

By 1950, the population of Las Vegas had expanded to 24,624. The city continued to focus on growth, looking for additional ways to increase jobs and attract tourists. The increase in automobile tourism following World War II also affected Las Vegas' growth and development, as businesses and building types geared to that market, such as automotive repair shops, gas stations, motels, and diners, expanded.

³⁶ "El Cortez Purchase Announced," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 20, 1962. Page 1.

³⁷ Excerpted from "The South Fifth Street, El Centro, and Beverly Green Tracts Phase I Beverly Green Neighborhood Survey and Inventory, Las Vegas, Clark County, Nevada," prepared by Kautz Environmental Consultants, Inc. Prepared for the City of Las Vegas Development Services Center and Historic Preservation Commission. June 28, 2011.

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As relates to downtown Las Vegas, all of the action had been along Fremont Street in the city prior to the Second World War. But during the war, as the newly opened Hotel El Rancho Vegas, Hotel Last Frontier and several small night clubs were constructed along Highway 91, attention was shifted to the newly christened Las Vegas Strip situated south of Las Vegas' city limits along Highway 91 in Clark County. The post war additions to Highway 91 of the Flamingo Hotel, soon followed by the Sahara, Desert Inn, Sands and others contributed to this shift.

Fremont Street: Pre-1945³⁸

The railroad governed Las Vegas' design, shifting it twenty-seven degrees off north to accommodate the straightest run for track through the valley. Las Vegas was a prototypical railroad town: a gridiron of blocks paralleling the tracks. In theory, a grid can be stretched in all directions infinitely and equally. It is the perfect form, in the eyes of civic boosters, for a town with no limit to its potential. The railroad station weighted this grid at one point. Within the vast space of the desert, the railroad decided to stop the train at one place, Main and Fremont streets, which became the town's gateway. At this portal, at the head of Fremont Street, people stepped off the train. The most valuable lots sold at the 1905 real estate auction were therefore nearest the station. All other districts fanned out from this point in decreasing value.

By 1906 Las Vegas had a railroad station, the grandest building in Las Vegas at the time. This Mission Revival structure was a modest version of sumptuous haciendas, pueblos, and missions that the Fred Harvey Company built and managed as railroad hotels and restaurants along the western train lines. The location established the dominance and wealth of the east side of town for most of the century. By 1908 the corner of First and Fremont already had a Greek temple bank. Signs in 1908 were thin, wooden, and horizontal, and announced services: baths, shoe shop, groceries, drugstore. Liquor sales were limited to Block 16, the red light district located on the east side of north of First Street between Ogden and Stewart avenues.

Clark County was established in 1909, a critical development for the future Strip. By 1925, Fremont Street was paved all the way to Fifth Street, and Fifth was paved all the way south to the town line. South of there Fifth became the Los Angeles Highway. The highway was the latest version of the wagon roads and railroad lines that brought people west in the first place.

In much of the West, a new tourist architecture began to be built in the 1920s. Most of the first western tourists were rugged adventurers who camped out. Wealthier tourists appreciated the comforts of hotels such as La Fonda in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a pueblويد hotel from 1920. Soon, the Spanish Colonial and Mediterranean Revival styles would surge in popularity as applied to single- and multi-family residences, especially in Los Angeles. Hotels, too, were influenced by these styles including the enormous Ambassador Hotel erected in 1921 on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. It would be the Spanish Colonial Revival style, combined with a rustic Western flavor that would be utilized in the design and naming of the El Cortez Hotel in 1941.

Following the 1931 legalization of gambling in Nevada, the first legal gambling clubs in Las Vegas were

³⁸ Excerpted and adapted from Hess, Alan. *Viva Las Vegas: After Hours Architecture*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993.

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simply business as usual, with back room gambling relocated to the front room facing Fremont Street. Locals were the main market, although other clubs, located outside of town along the highways, catered to travelers. The first gambling license in Clark County went to Mayme Stocker of the Northern Club, a Fremont Street bar and restaurant which opened in 1912. Five other licenses granted in 1931 in Las Vegas went to clubs on Fremont Street between First and Third (later extended to Fifth), near the old red light district. The El Cortez would be located even further east on Fremont at Sixth Street. Besides the new Hotel Apache and the Boulder Club next door, little changed on Fremont Street in the 1930s with gambling remaining a sidelight for Las Vegas, a steady but minor industry consisting of clubs along Fremont Street.

Featuring bars, poker tables, and slot machines, the Fremont Street clubs were largely a domain of serious male card players. Things began to change when tourism inspired by the Boulder Dam brought a different sort of clientele to downtown. As a result, some Las Vegas leaders envisioned their region as a tourist attraction and their town as its center. With visions of Nevada Palm Springs in their heads, they began to promote their characteristic western identity embodied by the desert scenery and "old west" lore.

Outsiders from Los Angeles would discover and exploit the potential at their newly built Meadows Club. A brief description makes the Meadows seem prescient: a combination casino, hotel, dinner club, and nightclub located outside the city limits on a main highway. Owned by Los Angeles underworld figures, Tony Cornero and his brothers, the Meadows Club opened in 1931. But this was ten years before the appearance of the El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier resorts, and fifteen years before Benjamin Siegel and his partners became involved with the Flamingo. The Meadows Club would last until 1936, the same year the dam project was completed.

In spite of Las Vegas' slow start, the foundations of the incipient neon city were laid on Fremont Street in the 1930s. Between 1930 and 1932, many of the one-story wood shacks were replaced by prosperous two-story brick structures. The two-story reinforced concrete Nevada Hotel (later the Sal Sagev, since 1955 the Golden Gate) across from the train station added a third floor in 1931. It still exists; however, it has suffered from exterior remodeling that has erased much of its original physical integrity. Drugstores, banks, bakeries, and other businesses stood beside the relative handful of casinos. Small storefronts dominated the street. State Café, Ethel's Liquor Store, shoe shops, and other establishments had standard signs of the period. While the storefronts had typical display windows, the casinos had frontages lined with wood and swinging doors to make entrance easy. These were replaced in the late 1930s with sliding glass panels, which opened the clubs to the sidewalk. Off Fremont, laundries, icehouses, and other service buildings tapered off into the scrubland.

Fremont Street's architectural design was eclectic. The basic buildings were a mix of one- and two-story commercial fronts' several were variations of stucco Mission and brick Victorian styles with a bit of appropriate Classicism used in bank buildings. Despite a few overtly western touches (the Las Vegas Club had a neon Indian head sign), Fremont Street was not self-consciously western in style. Indeed, the typical Fremont Street sawdust joint of the 1930s was a high ceilinged storefront crammed with gaming tables and a bar. A bingo lounge stood at the rear.

The gem of the new downtown was the three-story Hotel Apache that opened in 1932. It was as sophisticated as the town could imagine. An elevator rose to a supper club on the top floor. Canvas awnings sheltered the store windows of a café, drugstore, and lobby on the hotel's ground floor. Inside, zigzag corners decorated the interior arches, a motif borrowed from Native American designs and used to

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convey a western tone. In the mid-1930s the ground floor Apache Bar was the plushiest casino in town, with its own neon sign and terra-cotta facing.

Neon, the medium that was to make Las Vegas famous, was already a presence on Fremont Street, but its application was hardly exceptional. Only at the end of the 1930s did the wattage pick up. The Hotel Apache began with a single horizontal sign extending from the third floor. The Frontier Club, Boulder Club, Las Vegas Club, and Sal Sagev Hotel all had large vertical signs with modified zigzag modern crests reaching no more than ten feet above the roofline. Only the number of signs, and the fact that they advertised roulette and keno, distinguished Fremont Street's neon from the signs in urban entertainment districts elsewhere.

Casinos along Fremont Street began to flourish in the 1930s and early '40s as illegal gambling operators were driven out of other cities and took refuge in Las Vegas. While the first casinos on what would become known as the Strip opened for business in the early '40s, Fremont Street remained the valley's main attraction, its collage of colorful neon signs prompting the nickname "Glitter Gulch."³⁹

As Las Vegas became savvier about the potential of a tourist economy, it began to exploit its western heritage more consciously. The El Rancho Vegas, which opened in April 1941 just south of the Las Vegas city limits on the Los Angeles Highway, was self-consciously western in its theme. However, the conventional wisdom in the early 1940s was that a lavish and sprawling resort such as the El Rancho was too remote to succeed. Downtown remained the center of the city's growth.

As noted, an important indicator of Fremont Street's prosperity was the construction of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, 59-room El Cortez Hotel and Casino in 1941, built by Los Angeles contractor Marion Hicks with business partner John Grayson. Located several blocks east of the old center of town, the all-new building was bigger than the Fremont Street clubs although its hotel portion was smaller than the Apache's. The El Cortez would be located along Fremont Street, the historical center of Las Vegas, as opposed to far out of town on the Boulder Highway like the ill-fated Meadows Club. With the Meadows gone, the El Cortez became with its opening in 1941 another illustration of downtown's prosperous future erected at a time when Fremont Street was the heart of the city.

The war boom pumped money into the downtown casinos, which allowed them to grow by absorbing neighboring bakeries, Western Union offices, and other casinos. Fifty years later this consolidation would result in single casinos stretching across entire blocks and encroaching on blocks on either side of Fremont Street. Ill prepared to cope with the car, downtown faced a major parking problem during the wartime boom. Parallel parking was replaced with diagonal parking until parking was banned entirely from the casino district.

Neon signs continued to grow in size and complexity through the war years with the Pioneer Club setting the pace with its prominent vertical and canopy signs. Over the decade, postcards reveal a growing incrustation of neon tube lighting; neon seemed to be driving the architectural development of Fremont at this point. Casino owners and sign companies slowly escalated and accelerated the competition. Permanent sidewalk canopies, known in Las Vegas since 1905, became wider and served as frames for neon under, over, and along the marquees. Signs were scaled to compete with neighboring buildings and to draw in passersby on the sidewalk.

³⁹ Hess, Alan. Viva Las Vegas: After Hours Architecture, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993.

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Even before Pearl Harbor, the Apache, Northern, Boulder, and Las Vegas Clubs on Fremont Street expanded into neighboring storefronts and bars to make bigger and more spacious casinos. Architect Wayne McAllister remodeled and opened up the interior of the El Cortez in 1946 for Moe Sedway's syndicate.

Fremont Street became a showplace for neon signs. Intramural sign competition would lead to excesses and innovations that would make Las Vegas a city of signs and light. Though the boom of the early 1940s spurred Fremont Street more than it did the new highway hotels, the crowding and parking problems downtown underscored the advantages of the roadside site.

Historian Geoff Schumacher summarized the 1905 – 1945 period of downtown and Fremont Street in this way:

Fremont and Main is where it all started, where Las Vegas transformed from frontier rest stop to full-fledged town. And for 40 years that intersection was the axis around which Las Vegas rotated. It was the heart of 'downtown,' the place where Las Vegans shopped, ate in restaurants, watched movies, bought insurance, attended school and did their banking. It was also where people went if they wanted to gamble, drink and perhaps pay for companionship.⁴⁰

Fremont Street: 1946 – 1960

The future of Las Vegas arrived with the opening of the Hotel Flamingo on Highway 91 in 1946. Unlike the western themed El Rancho Vegas, Last Frontier, and most of the clubs downtown, the Flamingo was sophisticated, upscale, and modern, evoking the look and feel of a sleek Hollywood nightclub of the day. Despite a bumpy start – and the murder of the property's flashy proprietor – the Flamingo was successful enough to quickly spawn a host of imitators along Highway 91. Marion Hicks, the original co-owner of the El Cortez Hotel, had sold his interest in the property in 1945. Three years later, in 1948, Hicks opened the Ranch Modern style Thunderbird Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. Wilbur Clark's Desert Inn, a sleeker version of the Thunderbird, followed in 1950. The Sahara Hotel appeared in 1952, as did the ultra-modern Sands Hotel that same year. The Flamingo was completely remodeled in 1953 and its sparkling champagne tower became a famous beacon along the Strip for the remainder of the decade. The Riviera, Royal Nevada, and Dunes hotels all opened in 1955.

Meanwhile, Fremont Street still gloried in its Old West style. In 1946, the Chamber of Commerce named three blocks of Fremont Street "Glitter Gulch," thereby fusing the modern sheen and the Old West theme. Fremont felt little pressure to respond to the new resorts on the Las Vegas Strip in the late 1940s; the Strip had largely created its own market and brought in new customers. Additionally, many Strip and downtown establishments shared the same owners. The Golden Nugget, opened in 1945, set a standard for Fremont Street as the Flamingo would the Strip later in the year. The Golden Nugget's investors created a dazzling new casino out of a nondescript two-story commercial block at the corner of Second and Fremont. They chose the western vernacular of urban Gold Rush San Francisco, the Barbary Coast style. In 1950, a large sign was added, lifted clear of the roof on a steel framework one hundred feet in the air. It was designed by the Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO), the same firm that would design the El Cortez' enormous roof sign, marquee and "Gambling" signs in 1952. The Golden

⁴⁰ Schumacher, Geoff. "Sun, Sin & Suburbia: An Essential History of Modern Las Vegas," Las Vegas: Stephens Press LLC, 2004. Page 30

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Nugget sign was a radiant phantasm of neon and incandescent light that set off another round of bigger and brighter signs on Fremont Street.

In the 21st century, the most enduring of the monumental neon signs of the early 1950s, other than the neon signage of the El Cortez, has been the 60-foot cowboy known as “Vegas Vic” that was erected on the corner of the Pioneer Club in 1951 and survives today hemmed in by the curved canopy of the Fremont Street Experience.

In the 1930s the three blocks of Fremont Street had been a mix of Main Street shops and a few casinos. By 1955, Glitter Gulch contained only one drugstore, one telegraph office, and one bank as the casinos expanded. That year the tallest building in Nevada was erected on the corner of Second and Fremont streets. Strictly modern in style, the 13-story Fremont Hotel brought Strip amenities and style to Fremont for the first time. Another modern wonder of sign design in the 1950s was The Mint erected in 1957. The sign, though fabricated by YESCO, was designed as an integral part of the building by the architectural firm of Zick and Sharp, who had been responsible for modernizing portions of the El Cortez in 1952.

As the neon signage along the Strip became more elaborate, enveloping buildings the way the Stardust sign did its new hotel/casino in 1957, so also did the signage on Fremont Street. For example, the Golden Nugget expanded its neon across the entire façade and enlarged its corner sign in 1957, beginning a new era of Glitter Gulch signage so powerful that it would imprint the neon image of Second and Fremont streets in the global imagination. Following the Golden Nugget’s example was Binion’s Horseshoe (now simply Binion’s since Harrah’s bought the Horseshoe name in 2004). It had been purchased in 1951 by Benny Binion and fronted by Joe W. Brown for five years while Binion dealt with legal difficulties in his home state of Texas. The Horseshoe’s remarkable aqua blue neon façade that extends the entire block facing Fremont Street up to the top of the original Apache Hotel was completed in 1960 (and extended west to the corner when it swallowed The Mint in 1988). It should be noted that, while the original façade of the 1932 Apache Hotel apparently remains beneath Binion’s blue neon skin. In contrast to the modifications, the exterior elevations of the El Cortez Hotel remain visible, essentially as they have since 1952.

Fremont Street: 1961 - Today

In witnessing the growth of the Strip starting after World War II, the City of Las Vegas made several unsuccessful attempts at annexation. To this day the Strip remains an unincorporated township of Clark County, Nevada with the tax revenue from its ever-expanding hotel/casinos bypassing Fremont Street and downtown. Several other events diminished the growth and success of downtown Las Vegas in the postwar years. The construction of McCarran Airport south of downtown meant that visitors by air encountered the Strip hotels first upon their arrival. Additionally the opening of the convention center one block east of the Strip encouraged conventioners to stay in nearby hotels and not downtown. “As a result, the area’s surging convention business helped boost the expansion of Strip hotel facilities compared to those along the less strategically located streets downtown.”⁴¹

The Las Vegas Strip dominated the City’s tourism with its sprawling resorts drawing visitors who not only gambled but also enjoyed lounge acts, swanky restaurants, and relaxing swimming pools that the smaller downtown casinos generally did not offer.

Despite increasing competition from the Strip, downtown casino operators did not throw

⁴¹ Moehring, Eugene. *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-1970*, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989.

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in the towel. Instead, they upgraded their facilities, added hotel rooms and catering to serious gamblers and value-conscious visitors. In the '50s, Binion's Horseshoe Club, operated by Texas maverick Benny Binion, became a favorite of high-limit bettors and poker players.⁴²

The Fremont Hotel added a 14-story tower in 1963, The Mint built its 26-story hotel tower in 1965, the nine-story Sundowner was erected in 1965 and added a 33-story tower in 1983, and the Four Queens built its 18-story tower. The 22-story Union Plaza Hotel (by architects Zick and Sharp, with the El Cortez' Jackie Gaughan one of the co-owners) went up in 1971. Under the ownership of Steve Wynn, the Golden Nugget erected its first hotel wing in 1977. In 1984, the El Cortez itself greatly expanded its hotel capacity by erecting a 15-story tower with a two-story connection to its original building.

Consolidations and rebranding from the 1980s to the present day led to the massive expansion of the Golden Nugget that removed its iconic neon signage in 1986. The purchase of the Mint by Binion's Horseshoe led to the disappearance of the Mint's pink and white neon façade and the extension of the blue and white of the Horseshoe's neon skin around the block. Binion's Horseshoe was bought and sold by Harrah's Corporation (although Harrah's kept the "Horseshoe" name upon its sale). Sam Boyd purchased the Fremont Hotel; the Union Plaza was substantially renovated and recently reopened.

In 1995 the most monumental change to downtown Las Vegas arrived with the Fremont Street Experience, four blocks of an overhead light show from Main Street to Fourth Street that closed the area to traffic and made the former thoroughfare a pedestrian mall. The curved canopy screen required to display the moving images of the Experience blocked out the sky (and the upper portions of the buildings), creating a shopping mall-like enclosed space quite different from the street's historical urban feeling and appearance. Further east, the three-story Neonopolis dining, shopping and theatre complex was built on the block between Fourth Street and Las Vegas Boulevard. Between Fifth and Sixth streets, a mix of small nightclubs, restaurants, and retail stores remained.

Following the real estate and economic crisis of 2008 that was particularly damaging to Las Vegas, Fremont Street suffered the loss of numerous commercial tenants in the blocks east of Fourth Street. Only recently (2012) have new businesses begun to reoccupy vacant storefronts in this part of town. As for the Fremont Street casinos, Binion's closed the hotel portion of its property; however, the Golden Nugget continued to expand and the Union Plaza hotel/casino reopened after being closed for a number of years. Most recently, Fitzgerald's hotel/casino has undergone a substantial refurbishment as part of its conversion into The D Las Vegas. Yet, east of Sixth Street, the El Cortez Hotel and Casino continues to operate much as it has since 1941.

Conclusion

The El Cortez Hotel and Casino is associated with the economic and entertainment development of Las Vegas in general and on Fremont Street in particular from the early 1940s through the early 1950s. Fremont Street was the center of Las Vegas' tourism industry and the heart of the city's entertainment district from its incorporation in 1905 until the early 1950s, when it was supplanted by the booming resorts along the Las Vegas Strip. When the El Cortez opened in 1941, it became the largest and most fashionable hotel/casino on Fremont Street and would remain so for the next decade. With its 1941 opening, the El Cortez represented downtown's prosperous future at a time when Fremont Street was the

⁴² Ibid.

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heart of the city. As such, the El Cortez Hotel and Casino assisted in the city's economic development until the new resorts along the Las Vegas Strip outshined downtown Las Vegas. Therefore, because the original portions of the El Cortez Hotel and Casino represent a tangible, visible, and significant link to Fremont Street's economic development, the property meets National Register Criterion A for important historic associations. The property's period of significance is 1941-1952, corresponding with the period when the hotel/casino was most instrumental in the economic development of Fremont Street and the period when the exterior of the original El Cortez Hotel attained its current appearance.

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